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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 003655

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EAP, EAP/PMBS, INR/EAP, DRL/CRA, DS, S/CT
USAID FOR CDOWNEY

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL KISL ASEC FAID RP

SUBJECT: ELECTIONS IN MUSLIM AUTONOMOUS REGION PROCEED IN
LARGELY ORDERLY FASHION

REF: A. MANILA 3611

1B. MANILA 3477

1C. MANILA 3116

1D. MANILA 3046

11. (U) This message is Sensitive But Unclassified -- Please
handle accordingly.

12. (SBU) Summary: The August 8 elections in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) have proceeded in largely an orderly fashion as of the close of polls at 1500 hrs local. Mission observers on the ground have reported a steady stream of voters turning out to the polls. Philippine security forces are strongly in evidence and no serious cases of violence have been reported so far. Results are expected to be announced by August 10. Given the continued possibility of fraud and violence, it is still too early to call the elections a success, but problems thus far appear to be isolated in nature. End Summary.

ARMM Elections

13. (SBU) The August 8 elections in the ARMM have proceeded in largely an orderly fashion. The polls were open from 0700 to 1500 local to elect a new governor, a new vice governor and all 24 members of the ARMM Regional Assembly. The five Mission observer teams on the ground reported that voting began with a trickle, but steadily increased as the day wore on. (Note: There are five Mission teams in the region: one in Basilan, two in Cotabato, one in Marawi and one in Sultan Kudarat. End Note.) The number of registered voters in the ARMM's five provinces and one chartered city was 1.3 million. In 2001, 82 percent of registered voters participated in the elections. The turnout figures for today's elections have not yet been released, though Mission observers are reporting somewhat higher than 70 percent turnout in most of the precincts they have visited.

14. (SBU) In most precincts they observed, Mission teams reported that voting was orderly with a few isolated exceptions. In several precincts in Marawi City, voting was delayed when Commission on Elections (COMELEC) officials were late in setting up voting stations. However, by mid-morning all precincts that Mission team visited in Marawi were up and running. Mission observers reported scattered occurrences of possible voting irregularities, including: unauthorized people loitering close to polling places; bystanders apparently coaching voters; and illegal campaigning within 30 meters of polling places. COMELEC officials are also considering a possible declaration of "failure of election" over charges of "ballot snatching" in 10 barangays (village districts) in the area of Sumisip, Basilan Province. Some voters also complained that they could not vote because employers in Cotabato City would not give them the day off to leave the area and go outside of it to vote. (Note: Cotabato City, though the administrative capital of the ARMM, is technically not part of the ARMM and is not covered by the election holiday in the region. End Note.)

Largely Peaceful, So Far

15. (SBU) As of the close of polls, no incidents of serious violence have been reported. Philippine security forces were strongly in evidence throughout the region. According to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Southern Command, 12,000 soldiers and 6,400 police personnel are securing the elections. The security forces have set up hundreds of checkpoints to prevent the entry of unauthorized elements and to search for weapons. Security forces have reported that they were closely monitoring 122 "hot spots" in Lanao del Sur and Maguindinao Provinces where incidents of election-related violence have been reported in the past. The AFP was also monitoring about a dozen identified "hot spots" on the island provinces of Sulu and Tawi Tawi so identified due to tensions between members of rival political clans vying for Assembly seats. Thus far, as in other places in the region, the

situation in the "hot spots" appears to have been basically peaceful and manageable.

16. (U) There were two incidents of note. Alleged supporters of a local official in Lanao del Sur Province fired shots near a polling precinct, causing COMELEC to temporarily suspend voting. No injuries were reported in the incident. In addition, according to local media, a group in South Upi, Maguindinao Province, barricaded the municipal hall, preventing voting from taking place. The group is reportedly upset over a still-unresolved protest it filed over the 2004 mayoral elections. COMELEC officials announced today they may have to extend voting in the area until tomorrow. So far, there are no reports of any violence or injuries in connection with this latter incident.

Counting will take Time

17. (SBU) With the closing of the polls, ballots are now being gathered and moved to regional counting centers for tabulation. This move to regional centers was an innovation by COMELEC, which wanted to reduce the possibility of fraud. Counting will take time, as ballots must be transported from outlying precincts to counting centers in Cotabato City and elsewhere. (Note: All ballots from Lanao del Sur and Maguindinao Provinces will be counted at centers set up in Cotabato City. Ballots from the island provinces of Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi Tawi will be counted at central locations on each island. End note.) COMELEC Commissioner Florentino Tuason told poloff that he expects to announce the election results 48 hours after polls close (i.e., by August 10). Mission observer teams reported that poll watchers from President Arroyo's Lakas party have far outnumbered those from the opposition Liberal Party or other parties. This would suggest that the campaign of Zaldy Ampatuan, the Lakas candidate, is particularly well-organized. Ampatuan, the mayor of Shariff Aguak in Maguindinao Province, is the favorite to win the gubernatorial race over Ibrahim "Toto" Paglas and several other candidates who are less well-known (ref b).

Comment

18. (SBU) Philippine elections have a well-justified reputation for fraud and violence. So far, however, today's elections seem to have generally gone well. It is still too early to declare the elections a success: much fraud and violence in Philippine elections notoriously takes place during the counting phase, which is just beginning in the ARMM. Thus, the situation needs continued close scrutiny by COMELEC, local monitors, the press, and security forces. Mission observation teams, along with those from other countries, appear to have played a positive role, with local monitors and average citizens in the Muslim-dominated region warmly welcoming our engagement. The U.S. has also assisted by providing support through a grant to the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES), which has helped improve COMELEC capabilities and train local monitors.

JOHNSON